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French political culture in the 1970s: liberalism, identity politics and the “modest” state¹

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Abstract

French politics in the 1970s is notoriously hard to decipher. The increasingly violent attacks on Gaullism and Communism, the decline in French geopolitical power, and the end of postwar economic growth led to unprecedented unease about the nation’s collective future. But rather than treat the 1970s as an endpoint, I argue in this article that the 1970s represented a new beginning. I explore how more modest conceptions of political action, the emergence of a new kind of liberalism, and the development of identity politics led to a profound transformation of French political culture – one that tried to reconcile France’s long statist tradition with the realities of an ever-more fragmented polity.

“La France est veuve”. These were the words Georges Pompidou used to announce the death of Charles Gaulle to the French people on 10 November 1970.² France was now widowed; the nation had been abandoned to its fate. The beloved General, whose complex image had dominated French politics for the previous decade, was gone.³ Henceforth, the French would be in charge of their own destiny. Yet there was still hope amidst the mourning. When de Gaulle had first returned to politics in 1958, France was in the grips of a calamitous conflict in Algeria and on the verge of civil war.⁴ By the time he died, the country appeared to be in much better shape. It had renewed institutions, a strong presidency, sustained economic growth and an assured place in Europe. As far as Gaullists were concerned, the template was set and the Fifth Republic was secure; their commitment to the General had been fully vindicated. But even those on the left who had spent years railing against de Gaulle’s authoritarianism could quietly celebrate: yes, the left had been

¹ This article was the product of some extremely difficult circumstances. My first thanks go to Akhila Yechury for her support, care and attention. I am also grateful to Sonja Levensen for her patience and for pushing me towards the finish line. The ideas I develop here owe a great deal to conversations with Iain Stewart, Michael Behrent, Patrick Soulsby, David Priestland, Claire Eldridge, Stephan Malinowski, Tim Peace and Sudhir Hazareesingh. Long may their ideas continue to percolate! This piece is dedicated to my father who was very much a product of the 1970s and whose memory continues to inspire me.

² ‘Déclaration de Georges Pompidou’ on Journal Télévisé de 13h (10 November 1970), <http://www.ina.fr/video/CAF87002160>

³ On the myth of de Gaulle, see Sudhir Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of De Gaulle*, Oxford 2012.

⁴ Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, London 2008.

battered in the last legislative elections of 1968, but the passing of de Gaulle offered hope that real change might come sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately, many of these hopes were dashed. The left did eventually claim a long-awaited election victory (in May 1981) but the young Parti socialiste (PS) activists who thronged the streets to celebrate their successes were soon confronted with the harsh realities of the decade they had just left behind. Deindustrialisation, rising unemployment and the pressures of the European Monetary System shattered their dreams of Keynesian state socialism, and the rise of the Front National was an unsettling reminder of France's colonial and collaborationist past. Globally, too, the newly-elected French socialists were on the margins. Neo-liberalism was making serious inroads into international politics and France was beginning to lose control of a European project that it had tried to fashion in its own image. Above all, the French had experienced a crisis of confidence over the course of the 1970s. Old certainties had been washed away and ideologies had been challenged. In 1970, France was widowed, but the French could still think of themselves as a great nation. By 1980, the overwhelming feeling was one of exhaustion – or, as the philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky famously put it, “emptiness”.⁵

Not surprisingly, then, the 1970s have generally had a rather mixed reputation in France. The apparently overwhelming narrative of France's transition from a booming industrial economy in the 1960s to a stagnant post-industrial one in the 1980s has led to a mix of disillusionment and nostalgia on all sides of the political spectrum. Gaullists view the 1970s as a decade when the legacy of de Gaulle was gradually dismantled by non-Gaullist and left-wing movements, while militant *gauchistes* see the 1970s both as a missed opportunity and an uncomfortable transitional phase between the all-encompassing revolutionary politics of the 1960s and the narrow, issue-based politics of the 1980s. This sense of uncertain movement is reinforced by the feeling that the 1970s marked the end of an era in French intellectual life, symbolised by the death of Jean-Paul Sartre in April 1980. The slow atrophy of Marxism opened up spaces for a wide variety of non-Marxist intellectual currents (most notably liberalism), but none of these seemed to give much direction to the great political struggles of the era. Indeed, when the socialists came to power in 1981 they bemoaned the “silence” of intellectuals who were no longer willing to validate, even as fellow travellers, the left-wing principles with which they had so often been associated in previous

⁵ Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide: essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris 1983.

decades.⁶ At a much broader level, the disappearance of de Gaulle, mushrooming unemployment and the rise of the immigration “problem” fixed a popular perception of the 1970s in France as a tipping-point between a Gaullist politics of “grandeur” in the 1960s and the brittle, fragmented politics of the 1980s and 1990s.

Much of this ambiguity about the 1970s in France can be understood as a response to an intense period of political, economic, social and cultural upheaval. While the 1970s are viewed more positively in France than, say, in the United Kingdom, there is still a deep sense of dislocation and confusion about what exactly the decade is supposed to represent. As many European historians have observed, the 1970s saw the end of a certain pattern of postwar economic planning, the disintegration of a broadly Christian democratic political consensus and a sustained attack on hierarchical social norms.⁷ But a concern with endings has obscured the novelty of these years. If we take a broader and more conceptual view – as some scholars have begun to do – we can see the 1970s differently. Some have identified a new “spirit” of capitalism in this period; others have talked about a new “configuration” of power in Europe and North America. In both of these interpretations, the 1970s represent a key moment when postwar technocratic elites across the Western world were increasingly under fire from dynamic young managers and a new generation of intellectuals turned away from rigid conceptions of power.⁸ Drawing on these innovative historical and social scientific approaches, I argue that similar processes were at work in the French context. French elites were forced adapt to a changing context and, in so doing, they began to alter the parameters of political debate and political practice.

I focus my attention in this article on political culture, which is a notoriously difficult term to define. As in my earlier research, I take this simply to mean the norms, values, languages and symbols that circulate within a given political system.⁹ Specifically, I am interested in how French politics accommodated the wide range of new political actors that emerged in the 1970s as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation, decolonisation, and the demographic shifts of the postwar

⁶ Max Gallo, *Le silence des intellectuels*, in: *Le Monde*, 26.7.1983.

⁷ This has been exacerbated by existing historical literature on the postwar period, which has tended to see the 1970s as the endpoint of the “postwar moment”. See for instance Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe Since 1945*, London 2005 and Martin Conway, *The Rise and Fall of Western Europe’s Democratic Age, 1945-1973*, in: *Contemporary European History* 13. 2004, no. 1, pp. 67-88.

⁸ For contrasting perspectives, see Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris 1999; and David Priestland, *Merchant, Soldier, Sage: A New History of Power*, London 2012.

⁹ Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: nation, state and citizenship in contemporary France*, Cambridge 2015.

years.¹⁰ It is not possible to capture the entirety of these changes in a short article, but I nevertheless want to adopt a multi-layered analysis that includes intellectual, cultural and political approaches. In the first section, I concentrate on the crucial changes in French intellectual life after 1968. I emphasise how the legacy of 1968 and the fragmentation of Marxism encouraged a more “modest” form of political engagement. In the second section, I explore how these changes were played out in party-political circles, with a particular emphasis on Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s idea of a “société libérale avancée” and the emergence of a French form of neo-liberalism. Finally, I turn my attention to a crucial aspect of French political culture in the 1970s: identity and immigrant politics. This broadens the scope of the article by showing how changes that were taking place in the rarefied universe of the Parisian intellectual elites and the corridors of power were received, adapted and manipulated by a new constituency of political activists.

A multi-layered approach such as this makes it possible to see more clearly how French political actors mobilised new ideas and adapted to changing circumstances. After the violence of decolonisation in the early 1960s and the protests of 1968, the 1970s appear to be a period of relative quiescence in France – certainly in comparison to the years of economic crisis in Britain or the threat of far-left terrorism in Germany and Italy. Yet the changes that took place were still profound. The shift in French intellectual life towards more contextually-sensitive and “modest” theoretical frameworks, the active attempts by politicians to bring politics “closer” to the people, and the emergence of postcolonial identity politics all amounted to a significant reorientation of French politics by the late 1970s. Admittedly, the success of Mitterrand’s “Jacobin” brand of socialism in 1981 did not immediately suggest that French political culture had changed dramatically over the preceding decade. But by the time Mitterrand’s tenure came to an end in 1995, it was clear that France had become a more liberal, individualist and politically fragmented society.¹¹ There is little doubt that the slow transformation of political culture that began in the 1970s played a major role in this deep change in France’s political landscape.

Intellectual reconfigurations after 1968

¹⁰ For a comprehensive assessment, see Henri Mendras and Alistair Cole, *Social Change in Modern France: Towards a Cultural Anthropology of the Fifth Republic*, Cambridge 1991.

¹¹ There is now an extensive sociological and political science literature on the fragmentation of French politics in the 1990s. Particularly relevant in this context is Pierre Bréchon, Annie Laurent and Pascal Perrineau (eds.), *Les cultures politiques des Français*, Paris, 2000

It is impossible to understand the politics of the 1970s without reference to France's intellectual landscape. It was here that emerging debates and questions were discussed most explicitly. Even if many of these debates were contained within a relatively small and elite circle, their repercussions were felt much more broadly across French society and, as I discuss later, in the world of French party and activist politics as well. A brief sketch of the intellectual reconfigurations of the 1970s therefore provides the essential context for understanding the kinds of political language and symbols that underpinned the 1970s. In particular, I want to draw attention to three interconnected tendencies in French intellectual life: the collapse of Marxism, the liberal revival, and the development of a more modest conception of political action.

If there is one dominant image of intellectual life in the years after 1968, it is the explosion and subsequent collapse of France's Marxist consensus. This had its roots in a deep crisis of the political left. As is now well-known, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, the Algerian War and the protests of 1968 dealt a severe blow to left-wing unity in France. While 1956 led to a mass exodus away from the largest left-wing movement in postwar France, the Parti communiste français (PCF), the Algerian War destroyed the legitimacy of the non-Communist left.¹² A generation of young activists brought up on anti-colonial politics could not accept that it was a socialist Prime Minister, Guy Mollet, who had sent troops to quell the growing unrest in Algeria in 1956-7. They abandoned him and his party – the Section française de l'internationale ouvrière (SFIO) – in droves, a process that eventually led to the formation of the dissident left-wing party, the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU) in 1960.¹³ These divisions meant that the left played almost no part in the foundation and elaboration of the new constitutional settlement of the Fifth Republic from 1958-62; it was simply too weak and divided to exercise any power over political events.

The impotence of the established organisations of the left was reinforced in May-June 1968 when student and worker demonstrations erupted across France.¹⁴ Of the main parties, only the PSU actively supported the protestors; the PCF and what was left of the SFIO kept their distance.

¹² For an overview of these debates on the left, see Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: the Intellectual Left in Postwar France*, London 1993.

¹³ Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli (eds.), *La guerre d'Algérie et les intellectuels français*, Paris 1988.

¹⁴ This is not the place to discuss the now voluminous literature on 1968. For different introductory interpretations, see Jean-François Sirinelli, *Mai 68: L'Événement Janus*, Paris 2008; Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68: l'héritage impossible*, Paris 2002; Boris Gobille, *Mai 68*, Paris 2008; and Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian students and workers in 1968*, London 2004.

This complete failure on the left to take advantage of a potentially promising situation, as well as a deep-rooted fear amongst the French electorate that a new revolutionary situation was developing, meant that all the left-wing parties were obliterated in the legislative elections of June 1968. With only 91 out of 481 seats, the parliamentary left was well and truly on its knees in the early 1970s. There were nevertheless signs of renewal on the horizon. The creation of the Parti socialiste (PS) in 1971 provided a united platform for the non-Communist left and helped break with the colonial blunders of the past. At the same time, the PCF put aside its differences with the socialists and signed a “Common Programme” with the party that lasted from 1972-77. Although Socialist and Communist unity faltered after the inability of the left to gain a parliamentary majority in the elections of 1978, the Common Programme paved the way for the PS to overtake the PCF as the largest party on the left. This fundamental change in power balance ultimately helped push the left as a whole towards the victory of 1981.¹⁵

Paradoxically, however, this strengthening of left-wing party politics was not accompanied by a concomitant resurgence in intellectual life. On the contrary, by the end of the 1970s, the Marxist framework that formed the stock-in-trade of most left-wing groups was under severe attack by French intellectuals. Already the rhetoric of the protests of 1968 had been openly hostile to orthodox Stalinist Communism, but the 1970s saw a much more generalised critique of Marxism in all its forms. The most famous expression of this critique was the *nouvelle philosophie* – a virulently anti-totalitarian form of anti-Marxism, underpinned by a collection of polemical writings by young philosophers such as Pascal Bruckner, Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann. The main figures of this movement – the so-called *nouveaux philosophes* – all published their first popular essays in the period 1975-9 and enthusiastically marketed their ideas in the media.¹⁶ With the help of the well-known literary television programme *Apostrophes*, hosted by Bernard Pivot, they quickly became a household name and a symbol of the anti-Marxist wave that was sweeping across French intellectual life.

¹⁵ For different perspectives on the postwar French left, see Jacques Julliard, *Les gauches françaises 1752-2012: histoire, politique et imaginaire*, Paris 2012; Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in labour and politics in France 1830-1981*, Oxford 1986; and the dated but useful R. W. Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, London 1981.

¹⁶ The most important texts of the *nouveaux philosophes* included André Glucksmann, *La cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes: réflexions sur l'État, le marxisme et les camps de concentration*, Paris 1975; André Glucksmann, *Les maîtres penseurs*, Paris 1977; Bernard Henri-Lévy, *La Barbarie à visage humain*, Paris 1977; and Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut, *Le nouveau désordre amoureux*, Paris 1977.

Of course, good sales and excellent publicity do not necessarily correlate with original ideas. Even at the time, the *nouveaux philosophes* were attacked by their peers and their former teachers – people like Claude Lefort and Raymond Aron – whose ideas they thought they were bringing to a wider audience.¹⁷ In retrospect, it is also clear that the *nouveaux philosophes* were engaged as much in a political battle as a philosophical one. As Michael Scott Christofferson clearly shows, the impetus for their controversial interventions was much less the “discovery” of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s “Gulag Archipelago” (which had recently been translated into French) than it was an attempt to warn the French electorate of the dangers of Communist rule – a real possibility given the apparent success of the Common Programme in the run-up to the legislative elections of 1978.¹⁸ Even if they were only one amongst a multiplicity of trajectories amongst left-wing intellectuals after 1968, the *nouveaux philosophes* were indicators of the changes that were taking place across French intellectual life as a whole.

Throughout the 1970s, left-wing radical politics in France was gradually decoupled from a Marxist framework. First the turn away from orthodox Marxism, and later the turn away from Marxism altogether, led to the formation of new groups with a wide variety of interests, from radical feminism to the state of French prisons. This was accompanied by a whole raft of new ideas, such as the concept of *autogestion* (self-government), which played a key role in the ideological orientation of the Confédération démocratique du travail (CFDT) trade union and the PS in the late 1970s.¹⁹ It was not simply that Marxism no longer formed the bedrock of French intellectual life; it was also that the traditional master concepts of postwar European Marxism seemed to be disappearing. Ideas of class or revolution, which still lay at the heart of the party-political rhetoric of the PCF and the left-wing of the PS in the 1970s, were falling into abeyance in lecture rooms and journals. Young activists were asking new questions and drawing on alternative genealogies. Over time, these coalesced around what Julian Bourg describes as a renewed interest in “ethics” – in other words, an explicit interest in the ethical foundations of politics. Whether in debates over Holocaust denial, biotechnology and AIDS, or the rediscovery

¹⁷ For instance, Lefort outlines his scepticism towards the *nouveaux philosophes* in his preface to Claude Lefort, *L’invention démocratique: les limites de la domination totalitaire*, Paris 1994, p. 6

¹⁸ This argument about the importance of the political context of anti-totalitarianism is made particularly powerfully in Michael Scott Christofferson, *Intellectuals Against the Left: the Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s*, London 2004.

¹⁹ On this, see Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *La Deuxième gauche: histoire intellectuelle et politique de la CFDT*, Paris 1984; and Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, esp. chap. 10.

of thinkers like Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Lévinas who had written extensively on ethics, Bourg argues that the French intellectual left became increasingly concerned with ethics through the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁰ Ultimately, this led to a wholesale reorientation of the French left away from Marxist ideas of revolution and capitalism towards a language of “responsibility” and “rights” – themes that would dominate intellectual discussions in the 1980s. In this reading, the *nouveaux philosophes* were neither original nor exceptional; they merely encapsulated the shifting mood of the late 1970s on the French left. An emblematic text of the *nouvelle philosophie* like Lévy’s “Barbarie à visage humain” (1977) may have been polemical and simplistic, but its obsession with good and evil betrayed both the ethical concerns of its author and the changing contours of the French intellectual left.²¹

In parallel with this renewal of interest in ethics, France’s intellectual class rediscovered liberalism in the 1970s. As with the ethical turn, this came in a number of different forms and one can identify at least two strands within this French liberal revival: one more conservative, the other closely attached to the left. The more conservative strand of the liberal revival gathered around the figure and legacy of the great postwar liberal intellectual Raymond Aron. Over the course of the 1970s, a growing number of young intellectuals began to use Aron in their attempts to build a new form of French liberalism that would act as a powerful focal point for criticisms of the Common Programme and offer a seductive alternative to Marxism.²² The most sustained expression of this conservative liberal revival was the journal “Commentaire”, founded in 1978 by Aron himself but essentially run by a younger group of intellectuals including Jean-Claude Casanova, Jean Baechler, and Alain Besançon.²³ With its frequent references to a French liberal “canon” (Tocqueville, Guizot, Constant...), its consistent attacks on the legacy of 1968, and a strongly anti-Communist line, “Commentaire” captured the emerging contours of a new conservative liberal disposition in

²⁰ Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, Montreal 2007, pp. 16-17.

²¹ Bourg discusses in depth the relationship between the *nouveaux philosophes* and the ethical turn in Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, Part IV.

²² Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, esp. chap. 6

²³ On this, see Iain Stewart, *France’s anti-68 liberal revival*, in: Emile Chabal (ed.), *France Since the 1970s: history politics and memory in an age of uncertainty*, London 2014; and Gwendal Châton, *La Liberté Retrouvée: Une histoire du libéralisme politique en France à travers les revues aroniennes “Contrepoint” et “Commentaire”*, Ph. D. Diss. Université de Rennes-I: Faculté de Droit et de Sciences Politiques 2006.

France – one that would become influential during the short-lived centre-right government of Jacques Chirac in 1986-88.²⁴

But the liberal revival also had a more radical strand that stressed the potential of liberal thought for a rejuvenation of political life in France. Influenced by *autogestion*, anti-totalitarianism and a desire to modernise Marxism, this strand has often been referred to as the *deuxième gauche* (second left) because of its influence on French socialism in the late 1970s. It was associated with figures like the politician Michel Rocard, the historian François Furet and the political scientist Pierre Rosanvallon, all of whom sought to challenge the “Jacobin” and “centralising” tradition of the French left in their respective fields. In the case of Rocard, the battle to bring liberalism to the heart of French politics was played out publicly within the PS. After a long career in the PSU, Rocard rose to prominence in the newly-formed PS as one of the sternest critics of Mitterrand’s Marxist and Jacobin rhetoric. Most famously, he articulated his vision at the PS Congress in Nantes in June 1977 when he described the “two cultures” of the French left – one Jacobin, centralising and protectionist; the other flexible, decentralising and open to modern capitalism. His explicit identification with the latter made his speech into a watershed moment for the *deuxième gauche*.²⁵ By contrast, Furet brought liberalism to French historiography and the study of the French Revolution. In his famous essay “Penser la Révolution française” (1978), he argued that the Revolution was not about class, but about ideas of political representation. In an explicit echo of contemporary anti-totalitarian debates, he argued that the obsession of the revolutionaries with total politics carried within it the seeds of violence and terror. Readers at the time quickly understood that this was a liberal criticism of Communism and Jacobinism – a position that Furet never refuted.²⁶ As for Rosanvallon, his early involvement with the CFDT and the dissident socialist journal “Faire” (founded in 1975) laid the ideological foundations for the *deuxième gauche* and helped bring *autogestion* to a much wider audience.²⁷

²⁴ Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, chap. 10.

²⁵ ‘Les deux cultures politiques’ (1977) in Michel Rocard, *Parler vrai. Textes politiques précédés d’un entretien avec Jacques Julliard*, Paris 1979.

²⁶ On Furet, see Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, chap. 7; and Michael S. Christofferson, ‘An Antitotalitarian History of the French Revolution: François Furet’s “Penser la Révolution française” in the Intellectual Politics of the Late 1970s’, in: *French Historical Studies* 22. 1999, no. 4, pp. 557-611.

²⁷ See especially the first issue of *Faire* (October 1975). Scanned copies of *Faire* are now available to view in the PS online archives, <http://www.archives-socialistes.fr/articles/page-187740>.

These debates were central to the political orientation of the PS. Rocard's defeat and the choice of Mitterrand as the PS's (winning) candidate in 1981 prevented the *deuxième gauche* from becoming the dominant tendency on the non-Communist left, but it remained influential. For instance, the pro-diversity *droit à la différence* policies of the Socialist government after 1981, as well as the party's commitment to decentralisation, all had their roots in the concerns of the *deuxième gauche*. In the intellectual world, too, the legacy of thinkers like Furet and Rosanvallon had a tremendous impact in the 1980s: by the time of the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989, most commentators were adamant that it was Furet's interpretation that had become the new orthodoxy.²⁸ In this sense, the *deuxième gauche* was a bridge between the dispersed fragments of post-1968 anti-Communism and the conservative liberalism of a journal like "Commentaire". In the same way that the centre-right drew on the liberal revival as a way of transcending its Gaullist heritage, so the centre-left used it to modernise its Marxist heritage.

With such a multiplicity of different intellectual trends, it is easy to see how contemporaries interpreted the 1970s as a time of uncertainty and fragmentation. Although the two largest single political groupings in French politics – the Gaullists and the Communists – remained powerful, the legitimacy of their founding ideologies was being eroded throughout the 1970s. This opened spaces for alternative ideas. On the far-left, identity politics began to take hold, with organisations like the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (GIP) or the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (FHAR) discussing ideas of "power", "domination" and "emancipation", and thinkers like Michel Foucault looking at the history of these ideas. On the centre-left, the *deuxième gauche* pushed a liberalising agenda deep into the heart of the PS and began to reconcile the left with identity politics. On the centre-right, pressure groups and think-tanks began to explore what a French neo-liberalism might look like. And even on the far-right, a collaborationist and pro-colonial outlook began to give way to a more "modern" ideology based on the ideas of thinkers like Alain de Benoist and the Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE) think-tank.²⁹

Yet there was one thing that tied almost all of these disparate intellectual movements together: a more modest conception of political action. Concepts that had been central to postwar

²⁸ Steven Kaplan, *Adieu 89*, Paris 1993.

²⁹ On this, see amongst others Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite. Jalons d'une analyse critique*, Paris 1994.

French political culture like “class” or “grandeur” gave way to much more limited (and much less voluntarist) vocabulary. *Autogestion*, for instance, implied small-scale management of industry at a local level, best exemplified by the way the workers of the LIP watch company in Besançon ran their factory between 1973 and 1976. In the same way, right-leaning French neo-liberals in the 1970s – like those gathered in the Association pour la Liberté Economique et le progrès social (ALEPS) think-tank – emphasised the importance of limited state intervention and private enterprise.³⁰ In this respect at least, the 1970s was an unusual moment of transition when large-scale collective concepts did not dominate the French intellectual landscape. In the 1960s, Gaullism had monopolised the available space and pushed aside a weakened left; in the late 1980s, a resurgent “neo-republicanism” would once again bring a transcendental and trans-historical concept back into the public imagination. But in the period from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, the dominant trend was towards a more modest politics that placed the individual and the small group above ideas of class or nation.

The promise and limits of civil society: Giscard d’Estaing’s “société libérale avancée”

Ideas rarely develop in a vacuum and, in 1970s France, the tendency towards a more modest conception of politics was reflected in the high politics of the period. We have already briefly discussed the changes on the left that underpinned the intellectual reconfigurations of the 1970s. In this section, I want to focus on the centre-right – in particular, the presidency of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974-1981) and his attempts to create an “advanced liberal society” that would acknowledge difference and empower French civil society. The rightward shift of the Giscard presidency and the landslide Socialist victory of 1981 has given the Giscard years an ambiguous place in the historical literature about the Fifth Republic, but they nevertheless provide a valuable insight into how France’s political class tried to adapt to the increasing liberalisation of French intellectual life and the challenges of political fragmentation.³¹

Giscard d’Estaing still holds the record for the youngest French president of the Fifth Republic. When he was elected in 1974, he was only 48. He had held a number of ministerial

³⁰ Michael Behrent, *Justifying Capitalism in an Age of Uncertainty: L’Association pour la Liberté Économique et le Progrès Social, 1969-1973*, in: Chabal, *France since the 1970s*, pp. 175-198.

³¹ The one major attempt to document the entirety of the Giscard years has been the series of books edited by Serge Bernstein and Jean-François Sirinelli entitled *Les années Giscard* (Paris: Armand Colin, 4 vols., 2003-10). They cover economic policy, European policy, social policy and institutional change during the Giscard presidency.

portfolios under de Gaulle and, later, under Georges Pompidou, but few expected him to win an electoral contest with the more established and better-prepared Jacques Chaban-Delmas. What marked him out from his older competitors, however, was his successful marketing strategy. In a sign of things to come, his campaign broke with the principles of Gaullism by acknowledging the importance of youth and the power of the media.³² The young candidate appeared on posters with his 13-year old daughter and encouraged popular personalities like Charles Aznavour and Johnney Hallyday to endorse his candidature. It was a highly lucrative strategy. While far-left organisations in the mid-1970s were denouncing the pernicious spread of consumer capitalism, Giscard d'Estaing concentrated on winning over centrist voters who were sceptical of 1968 but welcomed a change in political ideology and style.

This was most obvious in Giscard d'Estaing's enthusiastic support for liberalism. But, just like the liberal revival that was taking place in French intellectual life, this liberal turn in politics did not come out of nowhere. Even during the high tide of Gaullism in the 1960s, there had been influential voices arguing in favour of liberal reform. The best example of this was the Club Jean Moulin, founded in 1958 by Daniel Cordier and Stéphane Hessel in the wake of de Gaulle's seizure of power.³³ It brought together intellectuals and policymakers throughout the 1960s and acted as an important conduit for liberalism and a critique of the power of the French state both on the non-Communist left (Rocard, for example, was a prominent member) and on the centre-right. Members of the Club published regularly in *Le Monde* and collaborated on a series of publications that emphasised the need for a new form of democracy that would allow France to liberalise its state and society. Of particular interest in this context is the complex figure of Michel Crozier, one of the most important intellectuals of the 1970s and a long-time member of the Club Jean Moulin. Crozier started life as an organisational sociologist but, after several periods of work abroad in the United States, became one of the most trenchant critics of the "sclerosis" of the French administrative and French business. His enormously popular essay *La société bloquée* (1970) – in which he outlined the myriad ways in which France was a "blocked" society unable to reform its

³² On this see Raymond Depardon's documentary 1974, une partie de campagne, which was filmed in 1974 but only released in 2002. For a more general analysis of the role of culture in political life in the 1970s, see Gui Xi Young, François Mitterrand: A Cultured Candidate, Ph. D. Diss. University of Cambridge 2016.

³³ Claire Andrieu, Pour l'amour de la République. Le Club Jean Moulin, 1958-1970, Paris 2002.

institutions and its hierarchical structures – was not only one of the decade’s academic bestsellers, but also a perfect distillation of the Club Jean Moulin’s critique.³⁴

The Club Jean Moulin was dissolved in 1970, but this was not because it had been marginalised. On the contrary, its influence had never been greater. Several of its members now worked for the new Gaullist Prime Minister, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, whose inaugural speech on 16 September 1969 laid down the template for a liberal “nouvelle société”. Chaban-Delmas argued that French society had become stagnant, hard to reform and weighed down by a heavy state. Its intermediary bodies had been stifled and it was struggling to adapt to a decolonised, urbanised and technological society. Chaban-Delmas even cited Crozier’s idea of a “société bloquée” in the opening line of his speech and invoked Tocqueville halfway through.³⁵ This confirmed what everyone knew: that the tone and orientation of the speech were heavily inspired by the liberal ideas of the Club Jean Moulin. Yet despite the powerful rhetoric, the Gaullist centre-right was not ready for such an overtly liberal programme and Chaban-Delmas found it difficult to implement reforms. He was eventually ousted as Prime Minister in 1972 in favour of the more consensual Pierre Messmer. Nevertheless, Giscard d’Estaing’s victory two years later can be seen as a successful attempt on the part of the young liberal to outflank his rival. Chaban-Delmas laid the foundations but it was Giscard d’Estaing who brought the liberal project to fruition.

The pre-eminent expression of Giscard d’Estaing’s vision for France was his essay “Démocratie française”. Published in 1976, two years after he had been elected, it laid out in detail what the new president intended to achieve. In the first instance, it identified two problems in contemporary France: a twin demographic and economic revolution connected to the baby-boom and the end of postwar industrialisation; and the exhaustion of traditional political ideologies. In Giscard d’Estaing’s view, these called for a radical reassessment of how the French state interacted with the French people. Hence why the solutions he proposed – greater social pluralism; greater individual initiative; a new, more responsible form of economic development; and the democratisation of society – addressed social questions as much as the economy.³⁶ At the same time, it is easy to see how these policy directions were an extension of Chaban-Delmas’s

³⁴ Michel Crozier, *La société bloquée*, Paris 1970.

³⁵ Jacques Chaban-Delmas, *Discours d’investiture*, 16.9.1969, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/Chaban1969.asp>.

³⁶ Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, *Démocratie française*, Paris 1976.

“nouvelle société” project. In its emphasis on the transformation of society, it drew on the more radical aspects of the liberal revival, while retaining the conservative elements of Aron and Crozier’s liberalisms in its analysis of economic and foreign policy.³⁷

“Démocratie française” was not all empty talk. The Giscard presidency was characterised by a number of social and political reforms that conformed to the liberal principles set out by the president himself. The deregulation of France’s major TV station (the ORTF), the first tentative steps towards an environmental policy, and a modest reform of the Conseil constitutionnel all indicated Giscard d’Estaing’s desire to liberalise the French state and make it more receptive to new ideas. Likewise, the new administration put forward a number of key social reforms, including the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18, the legalisation of divorce and abortion, and the abolition of the death penalty. Only the last of these did not pass through parliament; all the others were successfully implemented, even the so-called Loi Veil on abortion, which provoked a deluge of violent criticism by right-wing deputies. Lastly, the budgetary austerity of the 1976 Plan Barre, which was designed to bring rampant inflation under control, was undeniably marked by an emerging neo-liberalism. Giscard d’Estaing did not suddenly turn his back on a long French tradition of economic dirigisme since he and finance minister Raymond Barre were happy to continue using the state to ration the allocation of credit and bolster state investment in huge infrastructural projects such as nuclear energy and the *trains à grande vitesse* (TGV). But the economic priorities of the Giscard years made clear that neo-liberal economic policies might be required to limit the effects of the post-Trente Glorieuses economic crisis.³⁸

If the early years of the Giscard presidency demonstrated the vitality of French liberalism, the later years showed its limits. In part, this was a straightforward question of political survival. As the threat from the left began to increase, especially after the legislative elections of 1978, Giscard d’Estaing and his ministers tacked to the right. With the re-emergence of Cold War hostilities at the end of the 1970s, they used the language of anti-Communism to discredit the Common Programme and stoke electoral fears about Communist participation in government. By the time of the 1981 presidential election, Giscard d’Estaing appeared to be an embattled and

³⁷ Mathias Bernard, Le projet giscardien face aux contraintes du pouvoir, in: Serge Bernstein and Jean-François Sirinelli (eds.), *Les années Giscard. Les réformes de société*, Paris 2007, pp. 13-26.

³⁸ François Denord, La conversion au néo-libéralisme. Droite et libéralisme économique dans les années 1980, in: *Mouvements* 5. 2004, no. 35, pp. 17-23.

disorientated leader; he was harshly sanctioned by the electorate who massively endorsed François Mitterrand and the young activists of the PS. But this defeat did not bring the liberalising project to an end. Much was made at the time about Mitterrand's "rupture" with capitalism, which seemed diametrically opposed to the soft business-orientated liberalism of the Giscard years, but more recent analyses have suggested that the 1980s actually saw a continuation of the liberalising project of the 1970s.³⁹ This was apparent in the Socialist abolition of the death penalty (an aborted measure from 1974) and the commitment to political decentralisation and cultural pluralism (both of which had featured in "Démocratie française", albeit in a more modest form). Moreover, once Mitterrand accepted the necessity of budgetary austerity in 1983, the economic policies of the Socialists were almost indistinguishable from those of Raymond Barre in the late 1970s. Even as the Socialists rejected the language of liberalism in their political rhetoric, they found themselves implementing similar policies to those of their centre-right predecessors.⁴⁰

The impact of the liberal political moment of the 1970s was also visible more broadly across French society. Recent work has begun to show how political support for the development of "civil society" and intermediary organisations spurred on a huge increase in local associations. This was visible in the renewal of urban policy across France in the 1970s. Two excellent examples of this are Grenoble and Montpellier, both of which had moderate Socialist mayors in the 1970s – Hubert Dubedout in Grenoble (mayor from 1965-83) and Georges Frêche in Montpellier (mayor from 1977-2004). At the time, both of these figures were close to the reformist *deuxième gauche* current and they were influenced by the liberal critique of French state and society that had emerged from the Club Jean Moulin in the 1960s. Once in power, the two mayors set about creating a wide array of institutions to bring the state closer to individual citizens. Dubedout, for example, set up the non-partisan Groupe d'action municipale (GAM) in Grenoble in the mid-1960s as an experiment in participatory democracy that would be more responsive to local needs. Eventually, the GAMs spread across the entire country in the early 1970s and became a template both for the *autogestion*-inspired left and the liberal right.⁴¹ Frêche followed in the footsteps of Dubedout by creating a network of "Maison pour tous" neighbourhood community centres across Montpellier

³⁹ Mathias Bernard, *Les Années Mitterrand*, Paris 2015.

⁴⁰ On this transition, see amongst others the insightful analysis in Jonah Levy, *Tocqueville's Revenge: State, Society and Economy in Contemporary France*, Cambridge MA 1999.

⁴¹ Jean-Pierre Bernard et al., *Les Groupes d'action municipale dans le système politique local: Grenoble, Valence, Chambéry*, in: *Revue française de science politique* 22. 1972, no. 2, pp. 296-318.

after his election in 1977. These were designed to provide spaces for locals to meet, as well as offering easier access to municipal services. They were a huge success and were widely copied by other cities in the 1980s. They are often cited as the main reason why Frêche was able to remain mayor of the city for almost thirty years.⁴²

There were many other indications that the “advanced liberal society” that Giscard d’Estaing had imagined was not simply a construct of his imagination. Although much cultural, urban and youth policy is associated with the period after the Socialist victory of 1981, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that structures were already well in place before that. For instance, some scholars have pointed to the development of an explicit “youth” policy in the 1970s and the exponential increase in the number of *animateurs* (youth group leaders) as a sign that the French state was beginning to adapt to growing diversity in French society; this trend continued into the 1980s and 90s.⁴³ Even in the private sector, the 1970s was a time when managerial hierarchies were breaking down as businesses tried to respond to the criticisms of intellectuals like Crozier who believed that French firms were ossified and uncompetitive.⁴⁴ None of this is supposed to suggest that France was an exceptionally liberal society at the end of the 1970s. Nor do I mean to say that French politics became entirely comfortable with the language of liberalism in this period.⁴⁵ Yet it is clear that the Giscard presidency reflected and magnified a growing liberal tendency within French politics. One might argue that, just as Giscard d’Estaing outflanked Chaban-Delmas by promising a more authentic liberalism in 1974, so Mitterrand’s young Socialists did the same to Giscard d’Estaing in 1981. Given their ideological orientation and grandiose plans for state socialism, most Socialist politicians who were elected in 1981 would have vehemently disagreed with the assertion that their victory represented the final triumph of a more “modest” and liberal view of the French state and French society. But the explicitly anti-liberal and neo-republican backlash in the party in the late 1980s demonstrates just how far the PS benefited from – and took advantage of – the liberalising tendencies of the 1970s.

⁴² Emile Chabal, *Le Président? Georges Frêche and the making of a local notable in late 20th century France*, in: Philip Whalen and Patrick Young (eds.), *Place and Locality in Modern France, 1750-present*, London 2014.

⁴³ Jean-Claude Gillet, *Animation et animateurs: le sens de l’action*, Paris 2000.

⁴⁴ Isabelle Berrebi-Hoffmann and Pierre Grémion, *Élites intellectuelles et réforme de l’État. Esquisse en trois temps d’un déplacement d’expertise* in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* CXXVI. 2009, pp. 39-59.

⁴⁵ On the historical weakness of French liberalism see for example Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French intellectuals, 1944-1956*, Oxford 1986; and rather less polemically Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France*, Oxford 1994.

The pressures of the past: immigration and memory in postcolonial France

In this final section, I want to come down from intellectual and high politics to look more closely at associative life in France. Were the intellectual reconfigurations of the 1970s reflected in civil society activism? How did activists respond to the more liberal, “modest” and individualist model of political action that was being promoted by France’s political leaders? An excellent case study of the impact of these changes on French civil society is the politics of immigration and colonial memory. This very new form of activism was a product of the 1970s and was shaped by its priorities. It thus brings together many of the broader issues discussed earlier. For instance, just like their counterparts in French universities, the leaders of left-wing immigrant organisations adapted Marxism to specific contemporary ethical problems such as racism and historical memory. Likewise, general calls for the “democratisation” of society and a right to “difference” were mirrored in immigrant organisations’ strong attachment to identity- and group-based politics, especially as they sought to make claims on the state. The exact nature of these claims inevitably varied depending on whether the group in question was demanding action to protect North African communities from racism or seeking compensation for the *pied-noir* community. But, either way, the immigrant activism of the 1970s was a reminder that the creation of a new political culture was not simply a top-down initiative; it also involved grassroots political organisations.

Immigration and colonial memory are not questions that have featured prominently in traditional accounts of the 1970s. The standard view of these issues is that they belong to later periods. There is a common perception that immigrant activism and anti-racism came to prominence in the early 1980s at the time of the Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme (often called the Marche des beurs) in 1983 and the formation of SOS Racisme in 1984.⁴⁶ Similarly, the 1970s is often painted as a period when France’s supposed “silence” and “amnesia” about its colonial past was at its most pronounced.⁴⁷ If the decade is remembered for anything, it is the official “closing” of France’s borders in July 1974 shortly after Giscard d’Estaing’s victory. This date has become crucial in histories of French immigration as it represents the final turn away from a postwar policy that encouraged immigration from southern Europe and the colonies.⁴⁸ But this

⁴⁶ I myself made this argument in Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, chap. 8.

⁴⁷ The classic text on France’s colonial ‘amnesia’ is Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l’oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie*, Paris 1991.

⁴⁸ Laurens Sylvain, 1974 et la fermeture des frontières. Analyse critique d’une décision érigée en turning-point, in: *Politix* 82. 2008, pp. 69-94

limited picture of how immigration and colonial memory affected French politics in the 1970s does not stand up to historical scrutiny. In fact, there was a wide variety of activism amongst postcolonial immigrant communities – whether North African-born Arabs, French-born second-generation ethnic minorities or Algerian *pieds-noirs* – and this gradually began to press itself into the mainstream of French politics, as well as elicit a response from the French state.

One area where there has been a reassessment of widely-held preconceptions is in relation to the role of immigrants in the protests of 1968 and their aftermath. Historians like Daniel A. Gordon have argued persuasively that immigrants were not passive bystanders in 1968, but central actors in some of the major industrial disputes of the time. At the same time, 1968 saw the absorption of some immigrant activists into far-left organisations that offered practical and ideological training. It did not take long, however, for immigrants to break away from the milieu of the French far-left and form their own organisations. The best-known of these was the Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA), founded in 1972-3. The MTA was unique at the time in its political focus on immigrants. There were already a number of other organisations that supported immigrants, usually related to their specific countries of origin, but the MTA sought to create a broader political front.⁴⁹ In this, it was largely successful. It was closely involved with the growing number of hunger strikes across France in 1973-4 in protest at the treatment of illegal immigrants (the so-called *sans papiers*) and helped organise marches against the escalation of racist violence in Marseille in the summer of 1973.⁵⁰ Both of these helped to bring the immigrant question to the foreground at a time when politicians were debating whether to restrict immigration in the wake of the oil crises. Not since the decolonisation of Algeria in 1962 had the French public been confronted so explicitly with the political actions of immigrants themselves.

For all its novelty, though, immigrant activism was not immune to the broader changes that were taking place on the French left in the 1970s. Quickly, the MTA adapted to the more ethical and modest politics of the 1970s. For a start, the MTA could not rely on traditional Marxist or nationalist ideas of solidarity, although both of these were crucial to the ideological backgrounds of many of its leaders. Instead, the MTA had to create a “hybrid” conception of political activism

⁴⁹ Daniel A. Gordon, *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-Racism in France*, Pontypool 2012, pp. 120-150.

⁵⁰ Abdellali Hajjat, *Le MTA et la 'grève générale' contre le racisme de 1973*, in: *Plein Droit* 67. 2005, <http://www.gisti.org/spip.php?article4337>.

that could draw in those from different nationalities, as well as acknowledge the racism of the French working-class.⁵¹ One of the ways it tried to do this was through cultural activities, especially theatre. Performances written and produced by immigrants flourished in the 1970s. Some, like the Al Assifa theatre troupe who put on a range of sketches and plays in the period 1973-6, were closely linked to the MTA. Others, like Kateb Yacine whose play “Mohamed, prends ta valise” was seen by 75,000 theatregoers in 1971, were not.⁵² In both cases the effect was the same: the consequences of worker exploitation were passed through the medium of culture rather than through strikes and meetings.

Indeed, so successful was the cultural mobilisation of immigrant communities in the 1970s that the French state began to take notice. The creation in 1974 of a Secrétariat d'état aux travailleurs immigrants was belated recognition that decolonisation had not put to rest the question of immigrant workers.⁵³ Soon after, the inauguration of l'Office national de promotion culturelle des immigrés in 1976 indicated the importance that cultural policy now had in the French state's project to “insert (*insérer*)” immigrants into French society. In the period 1976-81, this new department financed television programmes that “celebrated” the cultures of different immigrant communities (most famously *Mosaïques*) and developed the provision of foreign languages in French schools to include the languages of specific immigrant communities (such as Arabic or Turkish). None of these initiatives was particularly successful but they laid the foundations for the much more active politics of cultural difference of the early years of the Socialist government after 1981.⁵⁴ As in so many other areas, the 1970s marked the beginning of a new kind of politics – in this case, one that was more attuned to the growing diversity of French society.

The MTA, too, changed with the times. It was officially dissolved in the late 1970s and a number of its former leaders set up the magazine *Sans Frontière*. More focused on telling the stories of immigrants and appealing to a second-generation who were less connected with the nationalist struggles of the 1950s and 60s, *Sans Frontière* marked a shift away from the ostensibly

⁵¹ For a closer analysis of the MTA's ideas of ethnicity and nation, see Rabah Aissaoui, *Immigration and National Identity: North African Political Movements in Colonial and Postcolonial France*, London 2009, Part III.

⁵² Angéline Escafré-Dublet, *Culture et immigration: de la question sociale à l'enjeu politique, 1958-2007*, Rennes 2014, pp. 100-115.

⁵³ For the French state's response to labour migration around the period of decolonisation, see especially Neil Macmaster, *Colonial Migrants and Racism, 1900-1962*, Basingstoke 1997; and Amelia Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State during Decolonization*, London 2013.

⁵⁴ Escafré-Dublet, *Culture et immigration*, chaps. 4-5.

“revolutionary” politics of the post-1968 years to a more consensual form of identity-based activism.⁵⁵ This transformation was completed in 1987 with the setting-up of Génériques, an organisation that aimed to “faire connaître l’histoire et la mémoire de l’immigration”. Today, Génériques has a substantial digital and physical library of documents related to the struggle for immigrant rights in France.⁵⁶ It is revealing that an organisation that began life as a militant trade union had, by the late 1980s, become a repository of “history” and “memory”. Such a change perfectly illustrates how the “ethical turn” shifted the focus of the French left in the late 1970s. It is also a reminder that the identity politics that came to dominate French politics in the final decades of the twentieth-century had its roots in the political reconfigurations of the 1970s.

We can see many of the same processes at work in the history of *pied-noir* activism in the 1970s. Most accounts of postcolonial immigrant activism have excluded the *pieds-noirs* – the colloquial term given to the European settlers of Algeria, the vast majority of whom left at the moment of independence in 1962. This is hardly surprising since the *pieds-noirs* were vilified across the French political spectrum – especially the left – as symbols of France’s violent colonial past.⁵⁷ Whereas the MTA and other immigrant organisations were dealing with the exploitation of vulnerable and precarious immigrant workers, *pied-noir* organisations were seen as mere forums for a former colonising class to reminisce about the greatness of the French empire. But, while such political judgements are understandable, they hamper our ability to understand the origins of identity politics in France. If nothing else, the *pieds-noirs* deserve to be considered alongside other postcolonial immigrants for numerical reasons alone: the mass exodus of almost one million *pieds-noirs* in 1962 represents the largest moment of immigration into France in the postwar period, and one of the largest population movements in Europe since the “return” of Germans to Germany after World War Two.⁵⁸ Moreover, just like the waves of migration of non-European Algerians and Moroccans in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the arrival of the *pieds-noirs* was a product of decolonisation. The fact that the *pieds-noirs* were often sympathetic to colonialism does not mean

⁵⁵ Daniel A. Gordon, Sans Frontière and immigrant memory at the dawn of the 1980s, in: Chabal, France since the 1970s.

⁵⁶ Génériques maintain an interactive website, with full details of their collections, <http://www.generiques.org/>.

⁵⁷ For a more complete history of the *pieds-noirs* and their integration into French society, see Valérie Esclançon-Morin, Les rapatriés d’Afrique du nord, de 1956 à nos jours, Paris 2012; and Andrea Smith, Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe: Maltese Settlers in Algeria and France, London 2006.

⁵⁸ Manuel Borutta and Jan C. Jansen, Vetriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives, Basingstoke [2016].

that their political opinions were unimportant, nor does it mean that their patterns of mobilisation diverged radically from those of other immigrant populations in France.

The early years of *pied-noir* politics in France followed that of other recently-arrived populations in concentrating overwhelmingly on the welfare of the community. With the exception of large, national-level organisation like the Association nationale des Français d’Afrique du Nord, d’Outre-Mer et de leurs amis (ANFANOMA, founded in 1956), most *pied-noir* organisations in the aftermath of the exodus revolved around individuals in cities like Montpellier and Marseille.⁵⁹ Inevitably, the focus was on material matters – for instance, housing and job transfers – and the overall tone of *pieds-noirs* publications in the late 1960s was one of loss, betrayal and material concern.⁶⁰ As with other immigrants, the *pieds-noirs* first needed to secure their status within metropolitan France before they could elaborate a more sustained form of political engagement.

By the early 1970s, the condition of the *pieds-noirs* had improved significantly. They had received unprecedented support from the state in the form of housing and subsidies to help them reintegrate into French society, and the vast majority had found satisfactory jobs in a still-booming Trente Glorieuses economy. But these material improvements did not translate into political quiescence. On the contrary, politically-motivated *pieds-noirs* used their new-found security to launch a systematic attack on a French republic they felt had ignored them for too long.⁶¹ Two developments stand out in this story. The first is the founding of the Cercle algérieniste by a group of young *pieds-noirs* in November 1973. Dedicated to the preservation of *pied-noir* memory, the organisation could not have been more unequivocal in its attempts to ‘reclaim’ history: its inaugural manifesto stated clearly its aim to overturn “l’histoire officielle de la présence française en Algérie telle que la présentent ceux-là mêmes qui nous ont acculés à l’exil”.⁶² To this end, the Cercle set up a magazine called *L’Algérieniste* in 1977 that acted as a vehicle for *pied-noir* nostalgia.⁶³ It featured semi-fictionalised accounts of life in colonial Algeria, personal

⁵⁹ Emile Chabal, Managing the postcolony: minority politics in Montpellier, c.1960-c.2010, in: Contemporary European History 23. 2014, no. 2, p. 244.

⁶⁰ The magazine of the ANFANOMA, France-Horizon, offers a glimpse into the responses of *pieds-noirs* to the early years of settlement in France.

⁶¹ For a fuller history of *pied-noir* activism, see Claire Eldridge, From Empire to Exile: the Pied-Noir and Harki Communities in France, 1962-2015, Manchester 2016.

⁶² This quotation is taken from the Cercle Algérieniste’s original manifesto from 1 November 1973, which was reproduced on the front cover of *L’Algérieniste*, 2003, No. 104.

⁶³ For theories of colonial/imperial nostalgia, see Patricia Lorcin, Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900-Present, Basingstoke 2011.

reminiscences, and occasionally political editorials. This national-level discourse was reinforced by local branches, which organised meetings and cultural activities. The aim was to preserve the memory of colonialism and ensure that it would be remembered correctly by subsequent generations of French people. Several years before *Sans Frontière* and more than a decade before *Génériques*, the *pieds-noirs* provided a template for identity politics in postcolonial France – one that primarily emphasised questions of memory and history.

The second key moment in the history of *pied-noir* activism in France is the founding of the Rassemblement et coordination unitaires des rapatriés et spoliés (RECOURS) in 1976.⁶⁴ Led by the charismatic and media-friendly Jacques Roseau, RECOURS rapidly rose to prominence as the first postwar immigrant organisation to promote an explicitly electoralist strategy. This consisted of identifying politicians who had voted against or otherwise obstructed the numerous compensation laws for the *pieds-noirs* (and other colonial *rapatriés*) that came before the Assemblée nationale in the 1970s and 80s. The aim was then to unseat these politicians using the potential power of the *pied-noir* bloc vote in vulnerable constituencies. RECOURS published the names of “offending” politicians in the hope that this would either persuade them to fall in line or have them removed from office at the next election. It was an extraordinarily bold strategy and one that drew some spectacular successes in the 1977 municipal elections in the south of France where there were large *pied-noir* communities (Frêche, for instance, was a beneficiary of the *pied-noir* vote in Montpellier). A decade later, in 1986, this same strategy forced concessions from the newly-elected centre-right government of Jacques Chirac, which resulted in a major new compensation law in 1987. RECOURS had shown that postcolonial identity politics did not have to limit itself to history and memory alone; it could also have a direct influence on electoral politics.⁶⁵ Much later in the 1990s and 2000s, Muslim organisations tried to use similar tactics in local elections, but no postcolonial immigrant community has been as effective as the *pieds-noirs* in gaining electoral momentum.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ A more complete history of RECOURS can be found in Claire Eldridge, “‘Fiers de notre passé et fiers de nos liens fraternelles’: Questions of unity and solidarity between pied-noir associations”, Unpublished conference paper presented at the Institut Historique Allemand, Paris, March 2012.

⁶⁵ For the longer history of pied-noir political engagement, see Emmanuelle Comtat, *Les pieds-noirs et la politique: quarante ans après le retour*, Paris 2009.

⁶⁶ On the relative failure of Muslim participation in French politics, see Timothy Peace, *European Social Movements and Muslim Activism: Another World but with Whom?*, Basingstoke 2015; and Claude Dargent, *Le vote des musulmans*, Paris 2011, <http://www.cevipof.com/rtefiles/File/AtlasEI3/NoteDARGENT.pdf>.

Of course, one could easily object that straightforward racism explains the difference between the relative success of the *pied-noir* electoral strategy and the singular failure of other postcolonial immigrants to penetrate mainstream politics in France. But this does not take away from the fact that the 1970s saw the emergence of a whole variety of immigrant activism that revolved around questions of justice, memory and political participation.⁶⁷ The MTA and the Cercle algérieniste were almost certainly not what Giscard d'Estaing had in mind when he talked about an “advanced liberal society” with a vibrant civil society, but these organisations nevertheless benefitted from a political environment in which expressions of cultural difference were become more and more acceptable. While these tentative first steps appear rather tame in comparison to the heavily state-sponsored politics of difference in the early 1980s or the explosion of interest in colonial memory since the early 2000s, they were necessary building-blocks. By the late 1970s, identity politics had become an essential part of French political culture.

The birth of postmodern politics in France?

In the 1974 film “Les valseuses”, the young actors Gérard Dépardieu and Patrick Dewaere play two delinquent men in search of stimulation. Their minds seem to be focused on little more than casual misogyny, casual sex and casual violence; they roam the streets of France throwing stones at an absent or complacent bourgeoisie. The message is that they are children of a Trente Glorieuses that has let them down, an impression reinforced by the numerous shots of bleak, post-industrial wastelands. With its nihilism and its crass approach to sex, it hardly seemed like a box office smash, and yet it was one of the most successful films of the year; more than five million cinemagoers went to see it across France. Was this because of the film’s shock value? Or was it because the French in 1974 recognised something of their own experiences in the brittle personalities of Dépardieu and Dewaere? Either way, time has not been kind to the film – today, it looks dated and tired, rather like the French collective memory of the 1970s as a whole. Lipovetsky’s judgement on the age of “emptiness” seems to have been confirmed – politically, at least, the 1970s appear to many French people as an awkward moment between the greatness of

⁶⁷ Isabelle Veyrat-Masson and Pascal Blanchard (eds.), *Les guerres de mémoires: la France et son histoire*, Paris 2010.

de Gaulle and the flawed greatness of Mitterrand (both of whom remain by far the most popular presidents of the Fifth Republic).⁶⁸

But there is more to the 1970s than ephemeral political figures and economic crisis. Much as subsequent leaders have tried to deny it, this transitional decade had profound consequences on French politics. The frontal assault on Marxism in French intellectual life in the 1970s precipitated the terminal decline of the PCF, long before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union. It also paved the way for a left-wing political engagement that was both more ethically-grounded and more modest. For the most part, this remains the central DNA of today's PS. In a similar vein, the domestication of liberalism in the 1970s penetrated deeply into French politics. Since then, both the centre-left and the centre-right have struggled with the paradox of the Giscard presidency: how to enact liberal reform in France without getting defeated at the ballot box. Certainly, the Sarkozy presidency's mix of liberal "Atlanticism" and hardline attitudes towards migration bore more than simply a genealogical resemblance to the Giscard years. Finally, the nascent postcolonial identity politics of the 1970s has now become an unavoidable part of the French political landscape. It does not take too much imagination to see the violent controversy over the 2005 law on the "positive" effects of French colonisation as a re-enactment of debates from the 1970s between *pied-noir* groups and the MTA over colonial memory.⁶⁹

Perhaps, then, the best way of describing the political configurations of the 1970s is in terms of the birth of a "postmodern" form of politics. By this, I mean a politics that is fluid, unstable, and marked by a growing desire to appeal to the narratives of specific groups within society.⁷⁰ France was not exceptional in this regard; other developed countries were facing similar problems.⁷¹ But the French case highlights how difficult it has been for European societies to

⁶⁸ A 2014 BVA poll asked voters "Selon vous, qui est ou a été le meilleur Président de la Vème République?". 36% said Charles de Gaulle; 27% said François Mitterrand; only 8% said Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. BVA/Le Parisien/Aujourd'hui en France, Les Français et Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (18 May 2014), http://www.bva.fr/data/sondage/sondage_fiche/1534/fichier_bva_pour_le_parisien-aujourd'hui_en_france_-_valery_giscard_destaing5dbf9.pdf

⁶⁹ The 2005 law – entitled 'Loi portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés' – was, as the title suggests, heavily sponsored by pied-noir organisation who saw it as part of a long-term project to gain compensation and recognition. In the end, only the controversial article 4 on how French schools should teach the "positive" aspects of colonisation, was repealed; the rest of the law remains on the books. For a detailed account of the law and its implications, see Claude Liauzu and Gilles Manceron, *La colonisation, la loi et l'histoire*, Paris 2006.

⁷⁰ I draw here on ideas in Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Oxford 2000.

⁷¹ For the American case, see for instance Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, London 2011.

accommodate these changes. Predictably, since the 1970s there have been repeated backlashes against postmodern politics in the form of the Front National's ethno-nationalist politics of racism and the revival of neo-republican ideas like *laïcité*.⁷² These have both offered strong values and normative certainty as a way of counter-acting the tendency after 1968 – amongst sympathetic liberals and far-left activists – to deconstruct hierarchies and power structures. Nevertheless, this constitutive tension between a postmodern politics that was born in the 1970s and a French political class still yearning for the return of grand narratives and grand ideologies remains at the heart of France's current political crisis. One can only hope that a reassessment of the 1970s helps to rehabilitate an unfashionable decade that still holds important lessons for the twenty-first century.

⁷² I discuss in more detail the political changes in France in the 1980s and 90s in Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, chaps. 1-4.